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Our Asia correspondent offers a dark view of a nation not only without nationalism but also without much national pride

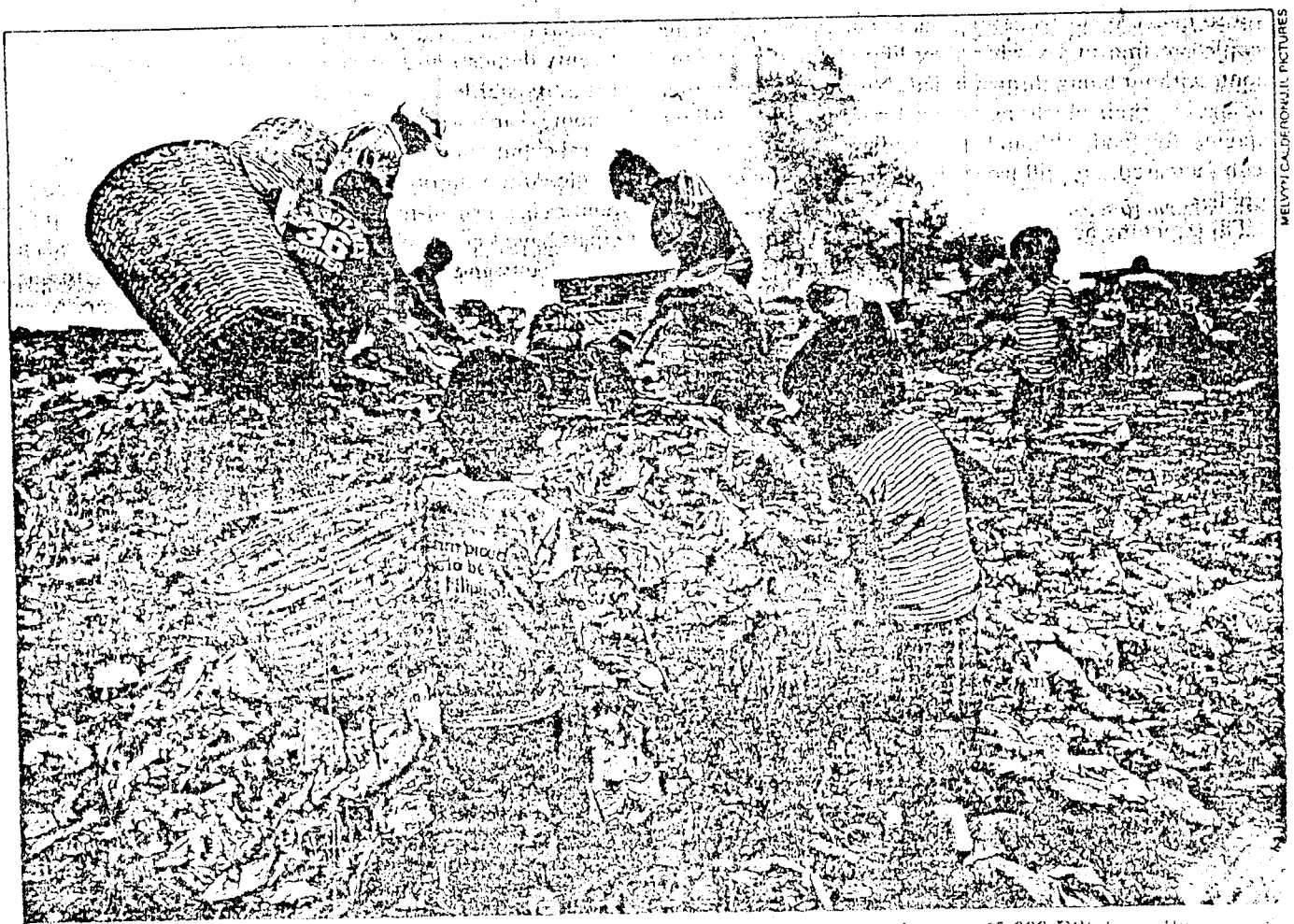
A DAMAGED CULTURE

BY JAMES FALLOWS

A New Philippines?

IN THE UNITED STATES THE COMING OF THE AQUINO government seemed to make the Philippines into a success story. The evil Marcos was out, the saintly Cory was in, the worldwide march of democracy went on. All that was left was to argue about why we stuck with our tawdry pet dictator for so long, and to support Corazon Aquino as she danced around coup attempts and worked her way out of the problems the Marcoses had caused.

This view of the New Philippines is comforting. But after six weeks in the country I don't think it's very realistic. Americans would like to believe that the only colony we ever had—a country that modeled its institutions on ours and still cares deeply about its relations with the United States—is progressing under our wing. It's not, for reasons that go far beyond what the Marcoses did or stole. The countries that surround the Philippines have become the world's most famous showcases for the impact of culture on economic development. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore—all are short on natural resources, but all (as their officials never stop telling you) have clawed their way up through hard study and hard work. Unfortunately for its people, the Philippines illustrates the contrary: that culture can make a naturally rich country poor. There may be more miserable places to live in East Asia—Vietnam, Cambodia—but there are few others where the culture itself, rather than a communist political system, is the main barrier to development. The culture in question is Filipino, but it has been heavily shaped by nearly a hun-



MELVYN CALDERON/JIL PICTURES

"Smoky Mountain," in the port district of Manila: a garbage heap that is home to 15,000 Filipinos

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The Agdao barrio, a slum near Davao, on Mindanao

dred years of the "Fil-Am relationship." The result is apparently the only non-communist society in East Asia in which the average living standard is going down.

Now a few disclaimers. Some things obviously have gotten better since Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos fled the country at the end of February last year (though most Filipinos seem to think that the threats to the Aquino government—of which the worst was the bloody August coup attempt—imperil such progress as the country has made). Not so much money is being sucked out at the top. More people are free to say what they like about the government, without being thrown in jail. Not so many peasants are having their chickens stolen by underpaid soldiers foraging for food, although the soldiers, whose pay has been increased, are still woefully short on equipment and supplies.

The economy has stopped shrinking, as it had been doing in the late Marcos years, and some rich Filipinos have brought capital back home. I was not in the Philippines during the Marcos era and can't compare the atmosphere firsthand, but everyone says that the bloodless dethroning of Marcos gave Filipinos new dignity and pride. Early this year, on the first anniversary of the "EDSA revolution" (named for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, where many of the crucial events took place), television stations ran round-the-clock replays of all the most emotional moments: the nuns' attempts to protect the ballot boxes, the defection of Marcos's two main military supporters, Juan Ponce Enrile and Fidel Ramos, the abortive swearing-in of Marcos, his sudden disappearance in an American helicopter. It *was* inspirational and moving and heroic, and as late as this summer, just before the attempted coup, some of the same atmosphere remained. Filipinos are famous for their love of religious icons. A visitor would have to be blind not to see the religious element in Corazon Aquino's public role. Stores sell small Cory dolls with bright yellow dresses and round-rimmed glasses. They're not exactly icons, but I've seen them displayed in homes and cars as if they were. Even when beginning to grumble about her government, many Filipinos speak of Cory's goodness, patience, and piety in tones that suggest they think of her as a secular, widowed Blessed Virgin, and as the only person with even the potential to hold the country together.

Democracy has returned to the Philippines, in a big way. As if to make up for all the years when they could not vote, Filipinos have been analyzing the results of one election and preparing for another almost nonstop since early last year. Election disputes have returned too. For three months after the legislative elections last May, long recounts dragged on to determine whether Juan Ponce Enrile, Marcos's former Defense Minister, whose switch to Aquino helped topple Marcos, would get one of the twenty-four seats in the Senate. Senators are elected nationwide, in what often resembles a popularity contest. Among the new senators is a Charles Bronson–style action-movie star; Enrile is about as well known as the actor, and though he has made many enemies, most foreigners I spoke with found it hard to believe that in an honest vote count he would have lost to everyone on Aquino's list of nominees, which included a number of newcomers and nobodies. Finally, in August, he squeaked in as number twenty-four.

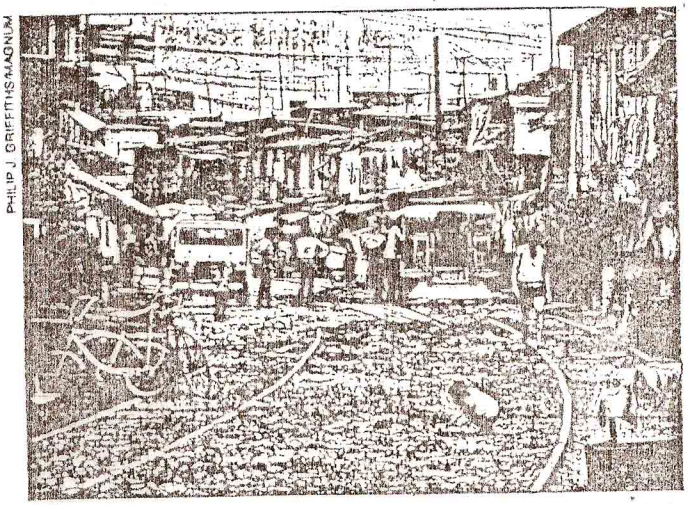
Democracy has unleashed a Philippine press so varied and licentious as to make even Americans feel nervous—or rather, to recall standing in grocery check-out lines looking at *Midnight* and *Star*. Newspapers are always starting up and closing, but at any given time Manila has at least twenty dailies, most of them in English. Each paper features its stable of hardworking star columnists, any of whom is capable of turning out 2,000 to 3,000 words of political commentary and inside gossip—the equivalent of a whole American op-ed page—in a single day. Philippine politics has a small-town feel, because so many of the principals have known one another all their lives. This adds to the velocity and intensity of gossip—especially the rumors of impending coups, which have cropped up every week or ten days since Aquino took power, and which preoccupy political Manila the way scandals preoccupy Washington.

One final disclaimer: it can seem bullying or graceless for an American to criticize the Philippines. Seen from Manila, the United States is strong and rich. Seen from anywhere, the Philippines is troubled and poor. Why pick on people who need help? The Filipino ethic of *delicadeza*, their equivalent of saving face, encourages people to raise unpleasant topics indirectly, or, better still, not to raise them at all. Out of respect for *delicadeza*, or from a vague sense of guilt that the former colony is still floundering, or because of genuine fondness for the Filipino people, the United States tolerates polite fictions about the Philippines that it would ruthlessly puncture if they concerned France or even Mexico. I don't pretend that my view of the Philippines is authoritative, but I've never before been in a country where my initial impressions were so totally at odds with the standard, comforting, let's-all-pull-together view. It seems to me that the prospects for the Philippines are about as dismal as those for, say, South Korea are bright. In each case the basic explanation seems to be cul-

ture: in the one case a culture that brings out the productive best in the Koreans (or the Japanese, or now even the Thais), and in the other a culture that pulls many Filipinos toward their most self-destructive, self-defeating worst.

The Post-Kleptocratic Economy

CONSIDER FIRST THE OVERALL ECONOMIC PICTURE. Officials in both South Korea and the Philippines have pointed out to me that in the mid-1960s, when the idealistic (as he then seemed) Ferdinand Marcos began his first term as President, the two countries were economically even with each other, with similar per capita incomes of a few hundred dollars a year. The officials used this fact to make very different points. The Koreans said it dramatized how utterly poor they used to be ("We were like the *Philippines*!" said one somber Korean bureaucrat), while to the Filipinos it was a reminder of a golden, hopeful age. It demonstrated, they said, that the economy had been basically robust until the Marcoses launched their kleptocracy. Since the 1960s, of course, the Philippines has moved in the opposite direction from many other East Asian countries. South Korea's per capita annual income is now about $2,500—which gives the country a low-wage advantage over Japan or the United States. That same income makes Korea look like a land of plenty relative to the Philippines, where the per capita income is about $600. The average income in the Manila area is much higher than that for the country as a whole; in many farming regions the per capita income is about $100. The government reports that about two thirds of the people in the country live below the poverty line, as opposed to half in the pre-Marcos era. There are technical arguments about where to draw the poverty line, but it is obvious that most Filipinos lack decent houses, can't afford education, in some areas are short of food, and in general are very, very poor. The official unemployment rate is 12 percent, but if all the cigarette vendors, surplus bar girls, and other underemployed people are taken into account, something like half the human talent in the country must be unused.



PHILIP J. GRIFFITHS/MAGNUM

The Tondo slum, on the outskirts of Manila

Some Filipino economists contend that the country is about to turn the corner, is ready to make a new start economically as it has done politically. Is the world price of sugar stagnant? Plantation owners can flood seaside sugarcane fields and raise shrimp, which bring high prices and for which Japan has an insatiable demand. Are American, Japanese, and European companies shifting their production sites worldwide? Why not build more of the plants in the Philippines, which believes it has a well-educated work force and relatively low wages. Just before the first anniversary of the EDSA revolution I spoke with Jaime Ongpin, an intense, precise businessman in his late forties, who had become the new Finance Minister. For the immediate future, he said, the trends looked good. The government was breaking up some of the cartels run by Marcos's "cronies" and exposing them to competition. Construction and small-business activity were picking up. The price of copra (the country's leading export) was finally rising. And the economy might grow by five or six percent this year—more than the economies of Japan and the U.S. Another economist, Bernardo Villegas, has been predicting an East Asian–style sustained boom for the Philippines.

Many man-on-the-street Filipinos share a version of this view, which is that Marcos was the source of all their problems, so his removal is itself a solution. There is some truth to what they say, especially as it concerns Marcos's last ten years in office, when he had graduated from his earlier, nationalistic, land-reform-and-industrialization phase and formed the "conjugal dictatorship" with his wife.

Still, for all the damage Marcos did, it's not clear that he caused the country's economic problems, as opposed to intensifying them. Most of the things that now seem wrong with the economy—grotesque extremes of wealth and poverty, land-ownership disputes, monopolistic industries in cozy, corrupt cahoots with the government—have been wrong for decades. When reading Philippine novels or history books, I would come across a passage that resembled what I'd seen in the Manila slums or on a farm. Then I would read on and discover that the description was by an American soldier in the 1890s, or a Filipino nationalist in the 1930s, or a foreign economist in the 1950s, or a young politician like Ferdinand Marcos or Benigno Aquino in the 1960s. "Here is a land in which a few are spectacularly rich while the masses remain abjectly poor. . . . Here is a land consecrated to democracy but run by an entrenched plutocracy. Here, too, are a people whose ambitions run high, but whose fulfillment is low and mainly restricted to the self-perpetuating elite." The precise phrasing belongs to Benigno Aquino, in his early days in politics, but the thought has been expressed by hundreds of others. Koreans and Japanese love to taunt Americans by hauling out old, pompous predictions that obviously have not come true. "Made in Japan" would always mean "shoddy." Korea would "always" be poor. Hah hah hah! You smug Yankees were so wrong! Leafing back through Filipinology has the opposite effect: it is surprising, and depressing, to see how little has changed.

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BECAUSE PREVIOUS CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT HAVE meant so little to the Philippines, it is hard to believe that replacing Marcos with Aquino, desirable as it doubtless is, will do much besides stanching the flow of crony profits out of the country. In a sociological sense the elevation of Corazon Aquino through the EDSA revolution should probably be seen not as a revolution but as the restoration of the old order. Marcos's rise represented the triumph of the nouveau riche. He was, of course, an Ilocano, from the tough, frugal Ilocos region, in the northwest corner of Luzon. Many of those whom he enriched were also outsiders to the old-money, old-family elite that had long dominated the country's politics. These elite groups, often referred to in shorthand as Makati (the name of the wealthy district and business center of Manila), regarded Marcos the way high-toned Americans regarded Richard Nixon: clever and ambitious, but so uncouth.

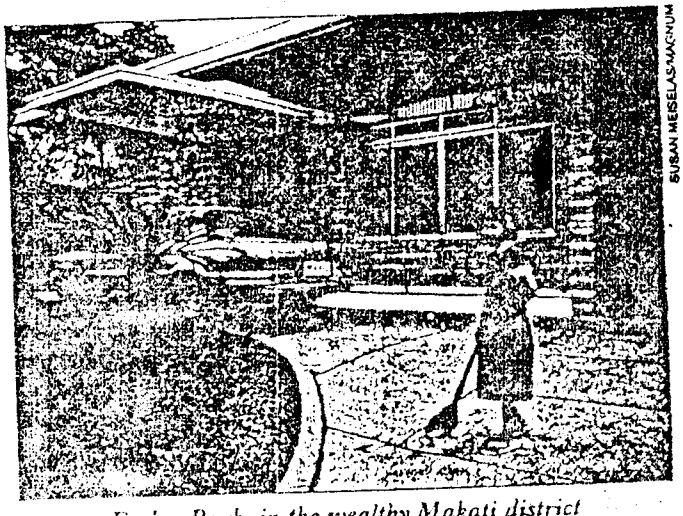
Corazon Aquino's family, the Cojuangcos, is part of this landowning elite. (Their name illustrates its Hispanic pretensions. Her great-grandfather came from China and was reportedly named Ko Hwan Ko, which was gentrified into Cojuangco. Most educated Filipinos speak fluent English, but in the stuffiest reaches of the upper class, I was told, the residual Spanish influence is so strong that it is a sign of greater refinement to speak perfect Castilian Spanish.) Her husband, Benigno Aquino, was also from a famous family. Her running mate in the 1986 elections, Salvador "Doy" Laurel, is the son of José Laurel, who was the Quisling-like President under the Japanese. Many of her first Cabinet appointees and sponsored candidates for the Senate bear old, familiar names. And so when Corazon Aquino replaced Marcos, it was as if Katharine Graham, having driven Richard Nixon from office through her newspaper, succeeded him as President—or Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, or Mrs. C. Douglas Dillon III. The traditional upper class was back in its traditional place. Carmen Navarro Pedrosa, a writer some of whose work was banned under Marcos, recently published a debunking biography of Imelda Marcos. Its killing blow, in its final chapters, was its assertion that while Imelda always pretended to be an aristocrat, Corazon Aquino really was one: "Her jewels were truly heirlooms, not recent purchases from Van Cleef and Arpels. She was a true blue stocking, educated in the United States, and fluent in French. She represented all that Imelda had ever aspired to."

Especially on my second trip to the Philippines, in the summer, many Filipinos told me that Aquino had become strangely passive in office, acting as if her only task had been to get rid of Marcos and ride out the periodic coups, rumored and real. As long as she did those jobs—that is, stayed in office—she did not feel driven to do much else. Perhaps she will do something to prove that judgment unfair; the August mutiny and preceding social unrest may force her not only to control the army more tightly but also to take economic problems more seriously. But even with the best will in the world, she will have trouble dramatically improving the country's prospects.

One morning this summer, as I stared out the window at the monsoon rain, I listened to two foreign economists describe the economic trap in which the Philippines is caught. The men had worked in the Philippines for years and had absorbed the ethic of *delicadeza*. They did not want their names, or the name of the bank they worked for, revealed. This reluctance might suggest that their views were unusually critical, which was not the case: they were remarkable only for how concisely they summarized what I'd heard in other banks, in embassies, in business offices, and from a few Philippine government officials. The men ticked off the list of possibilities for Philippine development and explained the problems in each case.

Manufacturing? "There were not many viable sectors to begin with, and most of them were taken over by cronies. The industrial sector is used to guarantee monopoly and high-tariff protection. It's inward-looking, believes it cannot compete. People are used to paying a lot for goods that are okay-to-shoddy in quality. Labor costs are actually quite high for a country at this stage of development. They should be like Sri Lanka's but they're like Korea's, because union organizing has run far ahead of productivity. It's a poor country—but an expensive place in which to produce. American and Japanese firms have set up some electronics assembly plants, but they're only buying labor, not building subsidiary industries or anything that adds real value."

Agriculture? "It's been heavily skewed for fifty years to plantation crops. All those traditional exports are down, sugar most of all. Copra is okay for the moment, but it's never going to expand very much. Prawns are the only alternative anybody can think of now." Agriculture is also nearly paralyzed by arguments over land ownership. Since the Spanish days land has been concentrated in a few giant haciendas, including the 17,000-acre Hacienda Luisita of the Cojuangco family, and no government has done much to change the pattern. "You could argue that real land reform would lead to more productivity, but it's an entirely hypothetical argument," an Australian economist told me.



SUSAN MESELAS/MAGNUM

Forbes Park, in the wealthy Makati district

"This government simply is not going to cause a revolution in the social structure." Just before the new Congress convened, as her near-dictatorial powers were about to elapse, Aquino signed a generalized land-reform-should-happen decree. Most observers took this as an indication that land reform would *not* happen, since the decree left all the decisions about the when, where, and how of land reform to the landowner-heavy Congress.

Services and other industries? "They're very much influenced by the political climate. I think this has tremendous potential as a tourist country—it's so beautiful. But they don't have many other ways to sell their labor, except the obvious one." The obvious one is the sex business, visible in every part of the country—and indeed throughout Asia, where Filipino "entertainers" are common. In Davao, on the southern island of Mindanao, I watched TV one night and saw an ad repeated over and over. Women wanted for opportunities overseas. Qualifications: taller than five feet two inches, younger than twenty-one. When I took cabs in Manila, the drivers routinely inquired if I wanted a woman. When my wife returned our children's rented inner tubes to a beach vendor at Argao, the vendor, a toothless old woman, asked if she was lonely in her room and needed a hired companion.

Resources? "Exploiting natural resources has always been the base here," one of the economists said. "But they've taken every tree they can easily get. It's not like Brazil or Borneo, with another fifty years to rip out the heart of the earth." Every single day Japanese diners take hundreds of millions of pairs of chopsticks out of paper wrappers, use them for fifteen minutes, and throw them away. Most of the chopsticks started out as trees in the Philippines, though more and more of them now come from American forests. The Philippines has more naturally spectacular mountains and vistas than Malaysia or Indonesia, but you can travel for miles in the countryside and mainly see eroding hillsides stripped bare of trees. Like Americans who speak of "conquering" the frontier, Filipinos sometimes take a more romantic view of what "taking every tree" can mean. F. Sionil Jose, a prominent novelist in his early sixties, who grew up in Ilocos, has written a famous five-volume saga—the *Rozales* novels—about the migration from the harsh Ilocos region to the fertile plains of central Luzon. The Ilocano migrants made a new life for themselves, he observes, and they did it by cutting down the jungle and planting rice. "There is some hope with minerals and gold," one of the economists said. Indeed, a Forty-niner-style gold rush is now under way in Mindanao. I was told that communist rebels, Moslem separatists, and former Philippine Army soldiers now work side by side in the gold mines, proving that economic development can be the answer to political problems.

The economists went on: "Geographically, the country is fractured beyond belief. The most controllable area is right around Manila, but beyond that the government's writ has never run very far." For instance, the newspapers that blanket Manila have virtually no circulation in the rest

SUSAN MEISELAS/MAGNUM

Behind gates and high walls, the good life

of the country: among a population of 55 million, the *combined* readership of all twenty-plus daily papers is about five million. "The education system has run down terribly." The Philippines spends about one eighth as much money per student as Malaysia does. Free education runs only through the lower grades, and after that the annual fee of $10 a student keeps enrollment down to 50 percent. "The fifteen-to-twenty billion dollars that Marcos creamed off has had a big effect. There's a kind of corruption that just recycles the money, but all this was taken out.

"And then you have population growth, which is closer to three percent than two-point-five, even though the government says two-point-two. The population could go over a hundred million in fifteen years. Since the economy doesn't grow that fast, the per capita income keeps going down." Most people I met in the Philippines asked me how many children I had. When I told them, the normal response was, "Only two!" By the end of my stay I was experimenting, raising the number to test the response. "Only six!" a priest said on my last day.

The economist concluded, "All in all, you'd have to say it's a worrisome situation."

The Meaning of Smoky Mountain

YOU'D HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING MORE THAN THAT. Most of the time I spent in the Philippines, I walked around feeling angry—angry at myself when I brushed off the latest platoon of child beggars, angry at the beggars when I did give in, angry at the rich Filipinos for living behind high walls and guardhouses in the fortified Makati compounds euphemistically called villages, angry as I picked my way among piles of human feces left by homeless families living near the Philippine Navy headquarters on Roxas Boulevard, angry at a society that had degenerated into a war of every man against every man.

It's not the mere fact of poverty that makes the Philippines so distressing, since some other Asian countries have lower living standards. China, for instance, is on the whole

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much poorer than the Philippines, and China's human beasts of burden, who pull huge oxcarts full of bricks down streets in Shanghai or Beijing, must have lives that are among the hardest on the planet. But Philippine poverty seems more degrading, for reasons I will try to illustrate through the story of "Smoky Mountain."

Smoky Mountain is, I will admit, something of a cliché, but it helps illustrate an important and non-clichéd point. The "mountain" is an enormous heap of garbage, forty acres in size and perhaps eighty feet high, in the port district north of Manila, and it is home to some 15,000 Filipinos. The living conditions would seem to be miserable: the smell of a vast city's rotting garbage is so rank and powerful that I could not breathe through my nose without gagging. I did finally retch when I felt my foot sink into something soft and saw that I'd stepped on a discarded half-full blood-transfusion bag from the hospital, which was now emitting a dark, clotted ooze. "I have been going to the dumpsite for over ten years now and I still have not gotten used to the smell," Father Benigno Beltran, a young *Mod Squad*–style Dominican priest who works in Smoky Mountain, has written. "The place becomes infested with millions of flies that often get into the chalice when I say mass. The smell makes you deaf as it hits you like a blow to the solar plexus."

The significance of Smoky Mountain, though, is not how bad it is but how good. People live *and work* in the garbage heap, and say they feel lucky to do so. Smoky Mountain is the center of an elaborate scavenging-and-recycling industry, which has many tiers and many specialized functional groups. As night falls in Manila, hundreds of scavengers, nearly all men, start walking out from Smoky Mountain pushing big wooden carts—about eight feet long and shaped like children's wagons—in front of them. They spend all night crisscrossing the town, picking through the curbside garbage dumps and looking for the most valuable items: glass bottles and metal cans. At dawn they push their carts back to Smoky Mountain, where they sell what they've found to middlemen, who own fleets of carts and bail out their suppliers if they get picked up by the police in the occasional crackdowns on vagrancy.

Other scavengers work the garbage over once city trucks have collected it and brought it in. Some look for old plastic bags, some for rubber, some for bones that can be ground up for animal feed. In the late afternoon at Smoky Mountain I could easily imagine I'd had my preview of hell. I stood on the summit, looking into the lowlands where trucks kept bringing new garbage and several bulldozers were at work, plowing through heaps of old black garbage. I'd of course heard of spontaneous combustion but had never believed in it until I saw the old garbage steam and smoke as it was exposed to the air. Inches behind the bulldozers, sometimes riding in the scoops, were about fifteen or twenty little children carrying baskets, as if at the beach. They darted among the machines and picked out valuables that had been newly revealed. "It's hard to get them to go to school," a man in his mid-twenties who lived there told me. "They can make twenty, thirty pesos a day this way"—$1 to $1.50. "Here the money is so good."

The residents of Smoky Mountain are mainly Visayans, who have come from the Visayas region of the central Philippines—Leyte, Negros, Cebu—over the past twenty years. From time to time the government, in embarrassment, has attempted to move them off the mountain, but they have come back: the money is so good compared with the pay for anything else they can do. A real community has grown up in the garbage dump, with the tight family bonds that hold together other Filipino *barangays*, or neighborhoods. About 10 percent of the people who live in Smoky Mountain hold normal, non-scavenger jobs elsewhere in Manila; they commute. The young man who guided me had just graduated from college with an engineering degree, but he planned to stay with his family, in Smoky Mountain, after he found a job. The people of Smoky Mountain complain about land-tenure problems—they want the city to give them title to the land on which they've built their shacks—but the one or two dozen I spoke with seemed very cheerful about their community and their lives. Father Beltran, the young Dominican, has worked up a thriving business speaking about Smoky Mountain to foreign audiences, and has used the lecture fees to pay for a paved basketball court, a community-center building, and, of course, a church. As I trudged down from the summit of the mountain, having watched little boys dart among the bulldozers, I passed the community center. It was full of little girls, sitting in a circle and singing nursery-school songs with glee. If I hadn't come at the last minute, I would have suspected Father Beltran of putting on a Potemkin Village show.

The bizarre good cheer of Smoky Mountain undoubtedly says a lot about the Filipinos' spiritual resilience. But like the sex industry, which is also fairly cheerful, it says something depressing about the other choices people have. When I was in one of the countless squatter villages in Manila, talking with people who had built houses out of plywood and scavenged sheet metal, and who lived eight to a room, I assumed it must be better to be poor out in the countryside, where at least you had some space and clean air to breathe. Obviously, I was being romantic. Back home there was no way to earn money, and even in Smoky Mountain people were only a four-cent jeepney ride away from the amusements of the big city.

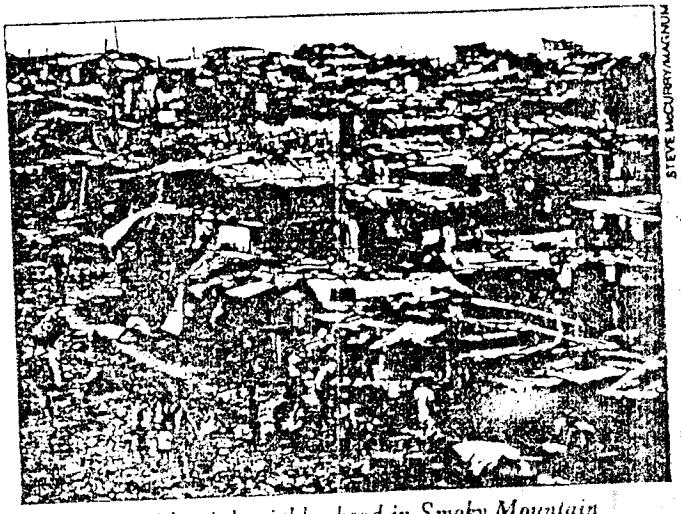
In Smoky Mountain and the other squatter districts, I couldn't help myself: try as I would not to, I kept dwelling on the contrast with the other extreme of Filipino life, the wealthy one. The contrast is relatively hard to see in Manila itself, since so much of the town's wealth is hidden, literally walled up in the fortified "villages." But one day, shortly after I'd listened to scavengers explain why some grades of animal bone were worth more on the resale market than others, I tagged along with a friend and visited one of Manila's rich young families in the mountains outside town.

To enter the house we had to talk our way past a rifleman at the gate—a standard fixture not only of upper-class areas of Manila but also of banks, office buildings, McDonald's—and then follow a long, twisting driveway to a mountaintop palace. The family was, of course, from old money; they were also well educated, public-spirited, sincere. But I spent my day with them in an ill-concealed stupor, wandering from room to room and estimating how many zillions of dollars had been sunk into the art, furniture, and fixtures. We ate lunch on the patio, four maids in white dresses standing at attention a few paces off, each bearing a platter of food and ready to respond instantly when we wanted more. Another maid stood behind my chair, leaning over the table and waving a fan back and forth to drive off any flies. As we ate, I noticed a strange *rat-a-tat* sound from inside the house, as if several reporters had set up a city room and were pounding away on old Underwoods. When we finished our dessert and went inside, I saw the explanation. Another two or three uniformed servants were stationed inside the cathedral-like living room, incessantly twitching their flyswatters against the walls.

The War of Every Man Against Every Man

AM I SHOOTING FISH IN A BARREL? SURE—YOU COULD work up an even starker contrast between Park Avenue and the South Bronx. But that would mean only that the United States and the Philippines share a problem, not that extremes of wealth and poverty are no problem at all. In New York and a few other places the extremes are so visible as to make many Americans uneasy about the every-man-for-himself principle on which our society is based. But while the South Bronx is an American problem, few people would think of it as typical of America. In the Philippines the contrasting extremes are, and have been, the norm.

What has created a society in which people feel fortunate to live in a garbage dump because the money is so good? Where some people shoo flies away from others for 300 pesos, or $15, a month? It can't be any inherent defect in the people: *outside this culture* they thrive. Filipino immigrants to the United States are more successful than immigrants from many other countries. Filipino contract laborers, working for Japanese and Korean construction companies, built many of the hotels, ports, and pipelines in the Middle East. "These are the same people who shined under the Japanese managers," Blas Ople, a veteran politician, told me. "But when they work for Filipino contractors, the schedule lags." It seems unlikely that the problem is capitalism itself, even though Philippine Marxists argue endlessly that it grinds up the poor to feed the rich. If capitalism were the cause of Philippine underdevelopment, why would its record be so different everywhere else in the region? In Japan, Korea, Singapore, and elsewhere Asian-style capitalism has not only led to trade surpluses but also created Asia's first real middle class. Chinese economists can't call what they're doing capitalism, but they can go on for hours about how "market reforms" will lead to a better life for most people.



STEVE MCCURRY/MAGNUM

A residential neighborhood in Smoky Mountain

If the problem in the Philippines does not lie in the people themselves or, it would seem, in their choice between capitalism and socialism, what is the problem? I think it is cultural, and that it should be thought of as a failure of nationalism.

It may seem perverse to wish for more nationalism in any part of the Third World. Americans have come to identify the term with the tiny-country excesses of the United Nations. Nationalism can of course be divisive, when it sets people of one country against another. But its absence can be even worse, if that leaves people in the grip of loyalties that are even narrower and more fragmented. When a country with extreme geographic, tribal, and social-class differences, like the Philippines, has only a weak offsetting sense of national unity, its public life does become the war of every man against every man.

Nationalism is valuable when it gives people a reason not to live in the world of Hobbes—when it allows them to look beyond themselves rather than pursuing their own interests to the ruination of everyone else. I assume that most people in the world have the same mixture of selfish and generous motives; their cultures tell them when to indulge each impulse. Japan is strong in large part because its nationalist-racial ethic teaches each Japanese that all other Japanese deserve decent treatment. Non-Japanese fall into a different category. Individual Filipinos are at least as brave, kind, and noble-spirited as individual Japanese, but their culture draws the boundaries of decent treatment much more narrowly. Filipinos pride themselves on their lifelong loyalty to family, schoolmates, compadres, members of the same tribe, residents of the same *barangay*. The mutual tenderness among the people of Smoky Mountain is enough to break your heart. But when observing Filipino friendships I thought often of the Mafia families portrayed in *The Godfather*: total devotion to those within the circle, total war on those outside. Because the boundaries of decent treatment are limited to the family or tribe, they exclude at least 90 percent of the people

n the country. And because of this fragmentation—this ack of nationalism—people treat each other worse in the hilippines than in any other Asian country I have seen.

Like many other things I am saying here, this judgment would be hotly disputed by most Filipinos. Time and again I heard in interviews about the Filipino people's love of reconciliation and their proudly nationalistic spirit. The EDSA revolution seems emotionally so important in the Philippines not only because it got rid of Marcos but also because it demonstrated a brave, national-minded spirit. I would like to agree with the Filipinos that those four days revealed the country's spiritual essence. To me, though, the episode seems an exception, even an aberration.

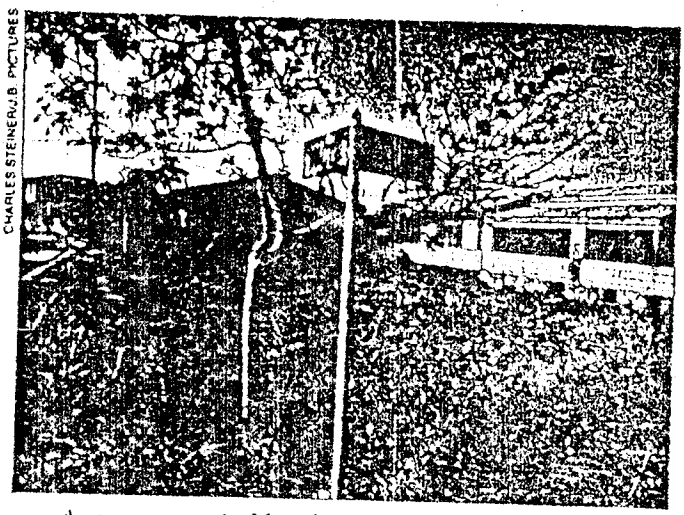
For more than a hundred years certain traits have turned up in domestic descriptions and foreign observations of Philippine society. The tradition of political corruption and cronyism, the extremes of wealth and poverty, the tribal fragmentation, the local elite's willingness to make a separate profitable peace with colonial powers—all reflect a feeble sense of nationalism and a contempt for the public good. Practically everything that is public in the Philippines seems neglected or abused. On many street corners in downtown Manila an unwary step can mean a broken leg. Holes two feet square and five feet deep lurk just beyond the curb; they are supposed to be covered by metal grates, but scavengers have taken the grates to sell for scrap. Manila has a potentially beautiful setting, divided by the Pasig River and fronting on Manila Bay. But three fourths of the city's sewage flows raw into the Pasig, which in turns empties into the bay; the smell of Smoky Mountain is not so different from the smell of some of the prettiest public vistas. The Philippine telephone system is worse than its counterparts anywhere else in non-communist Asia—which bogs down the country's business and inconveniences its people—but the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company has a long history of high (and not reinvested) profits. In the first-class dining room aboard the steamer to Cebu, a Filipino at the table next to mine picked through his plate of fish. Whenever he found a piece he didn't like, he pushed it off the edge of his plate, onto the floor. One case of bad manners? Maybe, but I've never seen its like in any other country. Outsiders feel they have understood something small but significant about Japan's success when they watch a bar man carefully wipe the condensation off a bottle of beer and twirl it on the table until the label faces the customer exactly. I felt I had a glimpse into the failures of the Philippines when I saw prosperous-looking matrons buying cakes and donuts in a bakery, eating them in a department store, and dropping the box and wrappers around them as they shopped.

IT'S EASY TO OBSERVE THAT JAPAN'S HABITS ARE MORE useful economically than those of the Philippines, but it's harder to figure out exactly where the destructive habits come from. The four hundred years that the Philippines spent under Spain's thumb obviously left a lasting imprint: at first glance the country seems to have much more in common with Mexico than with any other place in Asia. The Spanish hammered home the idea of Filipino racial inferiority, discouraging the native *indios* from learning the Spanish language and refusing to consecrate them as priests. (The Spanish are also said to have forbidden the natives to wear tucked-in shirts, which is why the national shirt, the *barong tagalog*, is now worn untucked, in a rare flash of national pride.) As in Latin America, the Spanish friars taught that religion was a matter of submission to doctrine and authority, rather than of independent thought or gentleness to strangers in daily life. And the Spanish rulers set the stage for the country's economic problems in the twentieth century, by giving out huge haciendas to royal favorites and consigning others to work as serfs. As in Latin America, the Spanish thereby implanted the idea that "success" meant landed, idle (that is, non-entrepreneurial or commercial) wealth. The mainly Malay culture with which the Spanish interacted was different from the Aztec and other Indian cultures in Latin America; for instance, societies throughout the Malay regions (including what are now Indonesia and Malaysia) are usually described as being deferential to their leaders, passive rather than rebellious. Perhaps for this reason the Philippines has not overthrown its clergy or its landed elite in the twentieth century, the way most Latin American countries have tried to do.

But for all that might be said about the Spanish legacy, the major outside influence on the modern Philippines is clearly the United States. America prevented the Filipinos from consummating their rebellion against Spain. In 1898 the United States intervened to fight the Spanish and then turned around and fought the Filipino nationalists, too. It was a brutal guerrilla war, in which some half million Filipino soldiers and civilians died. Losing an ugly war has its costs, as we learned in Vietnam; but winning, as in the Philippines, does too. In opposing our policy in the Philippines, William James said, "We are puking up everything we believe in." His seems a prescient comment about the war, especially compared with President William McKin-

SANDRO TUCCI/GAMMA-LIAISON

Only three? On the way to 100 million people


CHARLES STEINER/J.B. PICTURES

A streetcorner in Manolos: A failure of nationalism?

ley's announcement that conquest was necessary to "Christianize" a country that in ironic point of fact was already overwhelmingly Catholic.

In its brief fling with running a colony, America undeniably brought some material benefits to the Philippines: schools, hospitals, laws, and courts. Many older Filipinos still speak with fondness about the orderly old colonial days. But American rule seemed only to intensify the Filipino sense of dependence. The United States quickly earned or bought the loyalty of the *ilustrados*, the educated upper class, making them into what we would call collaborationists if the Germans or Japanese had received their favors. It rammed through a number of laws insisting on free "competition" between American and Philippine industries, at a time when Philippine industries were in no position to compete with anyone. The countries that have most successfully rebuilt their economies, including Japan and Korea, went through extremely protectionist infant-industry phases, with America's blessing; the United States never permitted the Philippines such a period. The Japanese and Koreans now believe they can take on anybody; the confidence of Filipino industrialists seems to have been permanently destroyed.

During the Second World War, Filipinos fought heroically against the Japanese, both before and after the fall of Corregidor brought on the American surrender of the Philippines, in early 1942. Following the war the United States "gave" the Philippines its independence and was in most measurable ways its benefactor: offering aid, investing in businesses, providing the second largest payroll in the country at U.S. military bases. But in unmeasurable, intangible ways it seems to have eroded confidence even further, leaving Filipinos to believe that they aren't really responsible for their country's fate. Whether I was talking with Marcos-loving right-wingers or communists who hated the United States, whether the discussion was about economics or the U.S. bases or the course of the guerrilla war, most of my conversations in the Philippines ended on the same discouraging note. "Of course, it's not really up to us," a soldier or politician or communist would tell me. "We have to wait and see what the Americans have in mind."

In deeper and more pernicious ways Filipinos seem to have absorbed the idea that America is the center and they are the periphery. Much local advertising plays to the idea that if it's American, it's better. "It's got that stateside taste!" one grinning blonde model says in a whiskey ad. An ad for Ban deodorant warns, "Hold It! Is your deodorant making your skin dark?" The most glamorous figures on TV shows are generally light-skinned and sound as if they grew up in Los Angeles. I spoke with a black American who said that the yearning toward "white" culture resembled what he remembered about the black bourgeoisie of the 1950s. College or graduate education in America is a mark of social distinction for Filipinos, as it is for many other Asians. But while U.S.-trained Taiwanese and Korean technocrats return to improve factories and run government ministries, many Filipinos seem to consider the experience a purely social achievement, a trip to finishing school.

"This is a country where the national ambition is to change your nationality," an American who volunteers at Smoky Mountain told me. The U.S. Navy accepts 400 Filipino recruits each year; last year 100,000 people applied. In 1982, in a survey, 207 grade-school students were asked what nationality they would prefer to be. Exactly ten replied "Filipino." "There is not necessarily a commitment by the upper class to making the Philippines successful as a nation," a foreign banker told me. "If things get dicey, they're off, with their money." "You are dealing here with a damaged culture," four people told me, in more or less the same words, in different interviews.

It may be too pessimistic to think of culture as a kind of large-scale genetics, channeling whole societies toward progress or stagnation. A hundred years ago not even the crusading Emperor Meiji would have dreamed that "Japanese culture" would come to mean "efficiency." America is full of people who have changed their "culture" by moving away from the old country or the home town or the farm. But a culture-breaking change of scene is not an answer for the people still in the Philippines—there are 55 million of them, where would they go?—and it's hard to know what else, within our lifetimes, the answer might be.

America knows just what it will do to defend Corazon Aquino against usurpers, like those who planned the last attempted coup. We'll say that we support a democratically chosen government, that this one is the country's best hope, that we'll use every tool from economic aid to public-relations pressure to help her serve out her term. But we might start thinking ahead, to what we'll do if the anti-coup campaign is successful—to what will happen when Aquino stays in, and the culture doesn't change, and everything gets worse. □

In future articles on the Philippines, James Fallows will discuss the communist insurgency in the islands and the long-standing issue of U.S. bases there.